



Why Landless Workers' Movement wants more than farmers' markets: the scaling up of agroecology and social justice in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines farmers' markets (FMs) in politically contested settings in Brazil. Through a case study of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST – Landless Workers' Movement), the research explores how Brazil's largest rural social movement pursues FMs as politically driven retail spaces through its *Armazém do Campo* network. Drawing on 144 interview excerpts from 99 news pages published on the MST's official website between July 2016 and May 2025, the analysis reveals a significant reconfiguration of the FMs model, which has emerged not under conditions of state support, but within politically hostile contexts marked by conservative administrations, as observed in Brazil and elsewhere. MST leaders and landless workers describe these spaces as “refuges” for marginalised groups and as “embassies” in cities representing agrarian interests. The findings demonstrate how consumers collectively assume responsibility for driving social change, thereby advancing what we conceptualise as mass food political consumerism – a form that democratises access by reclaiming scaling-up processes as tools to counter exclusionary dynamics. As a grassroots initiative of resistance, innovation, and solidarity, *Armazém do Campo* adds value to food by infusing FMs with the agendas of Global South movements.

1. Introduction

This paper critically examines the concept of farmers' markets (FMs) in politically contested settings, challenging prevailing assumptions that they are cohesive, publicly supported spaces that inherently promote social justice and sustainability. Building on Renting et al. (2003) characterisation of short food supply chains (SFSCs) as evolving across time and space, we propose that FMs should be conceptualised as contingent, adaptable, and dynamic formations. Their structures and operations are not only territorially grounded (Reina-Usuga et al., 2022), but also deeply embedded within broader political-economic processes. While prior studies have acknowledged the diversity of FMs (Figueroa-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Oths and Groves, 2012), there remains a pressing need to understand how such markets operate under conditions of limited or absent public support – particularly in contexts shaped by conservative political regimes.

At the same time that FMs continue to expand globally, many are institutionally fragile, highly reliant on external funding, and vulnerable to volatile political conditions. Some are susceptible to co-optation by retailers and agribusiness actors (Guthman, 2004; Renting et al., 2003).

Others risk collapse when confronted with conflicting agendas, unfavourable regulatory or policy environments (Oths and Groves, 2012). In recent years, institutional shifts and the dismantling of public policies (Niederle et al., 2023; Grisa et al., 2022) have compelled FMs to adopt diverse political rationalities and organisational strategies (Muñoz et al., 2024).

This study focuses on FMs that operate outside both state control and dominant ownership models (Gantla and Lev, 2015), emerging instead through divergent agendas among social movements, local governments, and producers. In such contexts, macro-level institutional governance may cease to act as a driver of FMs and may instead constitute a barrier to transformation. Conversely, civil society organisations that reinforce democratic values can play a significant transformative role (Berti and Rossi, 2022). In navigating these conditions, new FM arrangements resist simplistic binary classifications such as traditional versus modern (Oths and Groves, 2012), community- versus market-oriented (Gantla and Lev, 2015), or small- versus large-scale (Altieri and Nicholls, 2008; Mount, 2012). Instead, they embody hybrid logics, overlapping agendas, and complex actor configurations (Manganelli et al., 2020).

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This research draws on the case of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST – Landless Workers’ Movement) in Brazil, exploring how this social movement has redefined FMs as politically driven retail spaces through its *Armazém do Campo* network.

The article is organised into six sections, including this introduction. It begins with a literature review on public governance challenges and new propositions for FMs, situating the Latin American and Brazilian context. It then presents the data collection, methods, and analytical approach. The findings section addresses the particularities of the MST’s urban markets network, the political dimensions of food, and the strategies for enhancing the reach of agroecological and social justice values. The discussion develops the broader implications of scaling-up FMs, and the conclusion highlights the contribution of incorporating a Global South perspective into future reflections.

2. Literature review

2.1. Challenging public governance and reimagining farmers’ markets (FMs)

Within contemporary food systems governance debates, alternative food networks and SFSCs are increasingly recognised as arenas of both resistance and negotiation (Brunori et al., 2012; Renting et al., 2003; Lorenzini, 2019; Manganelli et al., 2020; Belletti et al., 2024; Goodman et al., 2012). Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition among scholars and practitioners (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2021), SFSCs generally refer to marketing channels that aim to strengthen producer-consumer links and local economies, with FMs representing one type of SFSC (Renting et al., 2003; Hinrichs, 2000).

As shown in a bibliometric review, most literature on FMs is concentrated in cases from North America and Western Europe (Figueroa-Rodríguez et al., 2019), where these markets are typically framed as face-to-face venues associated with geographic proximity, community building, and local development (Brown, 2002; Kirwan, 2004; Renting et al., 2003; Warsaw et al., 2021; Mengoni et al., 2024; Hinrichs, 2000; Manser, 2022). In these contexts, markets are also recognised as important spaces for political consumerism (Stolle et al., 2005; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). However, such representations risk obscuring the specific dynamics and experiences of the Global South.

As argued by Altieri and Nicholls (2008, p. 479), focusing solely on “niche markets for the rich in the North promotes agro-export schemes which do not prioritise food sovereignty but rather perpetuate dependence and hunger”. In Latin America, political agency has traditionally centred on labour, collective struggle, and citizenship rather than market practices. As Portilho and Micheletti (2019, p. 554) note, in this region “there is no clear tradition or belief in the effectiveness of the market as an arena for politics”. Yet in contested settings such as Brazil, where public policies on land reform and agroecology have proven inconsistent (Niederle et al., 2023; Grisa et al., 2022), FMs provide arenas where political consumer actions, from boycotts and boycotts to lifestyle politics, advance ethical and sustainable concerns (Boström et al., 2019a).

Indeed, some FMs in Latin America align with broader food sovereignty struggles for self-determination and also with processes of repeasantisation, the latter described by van der Ploeg, 2008, 2018 as the strategic resurgence of peasant practices in response to neoliberal food system restructuring. Repeasantisation is not a regressive return to tradition but a contemporary form of autonomy-building, anchored in self-managed economies, diversified production, and consumer engagement. Agroecology further provides a powerful and timely response to societal transformation (FAO, 2018; La Via Campesina, 2015; HLPE, 2019), serving as a scientific basis for sustainable enhancement of productivity whilst enabling local communities to innovate, evaluate, and adapt through farmer-to-farmer research and grassroots extension methods (James et al., 2023; Altieri and Toledo, 2011).

Rather than uniform or static, FMs (and the research on them) vary widely in governance models, political objectives, and institutional contexts (Figueroa-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Manser, 2022). For instance, since the 2000s, many FMs have expanded their missions to encompass cultural, educational, and social justice aims (Gantla and Lev, 2015). Emerging now are cases that not only provide empirically grounded alternative models but also address a critical and recent gap in the literature on market governance: namely, how FMs operate when democratic institutions and public support for grassroots mobilisations are under threat, and how new forms of political consumerism take shape in such contexts.

In sum, the scholars’ contributions discussed above expand our understanding of FMs’ values and governance in significant ways. While most studies focus on small-scale, consumer-driven or municipal-sponsored spaces (Gantla and Lev, 2015; Manser, 2022; Monticone and Samoggia, 2025; Lucas et al., 2024), less attention has been directed towards large-scale, social movement-driven or self-managed initiatives. This study extends the literature by foregrounding how FMs governance and scale have been challenged in contexts like Brazil by the MST. We explore both opportunities and constraints of this approach, which reimagines and prefigures new forms of FMs. Following Gantla and Lev’s (2015) definition, we understand market governance as the interplay between rules of participation, control, management, and decision-making structures.

2.2. Latin America and Brazil context

The structural constraints faced by smallholder and peasant farmers in Latin America are deeply rooted in longstanding land disputes and the far-reaching impacts of neoliberal agricultural reforms. The region exhibits one of the most unequal land distributions worldwide (Chappell et al., 2013). From colonial times to the present, agro-export strategies have been consistently prioritised. Today, this is evident in state-subsidised monocultures, land grabbing in ecologically sensitive areas, and the displacement of small-scale producers (Borras et al., 2012; Kato and Leite, 2020; McMichael, 2012; Pompeia, 2024; Dutra Da Silva and Fearnside, 2022; Fernandes et al., 2020). Moreover, the consequences of this model are visible in enduring realities of hunger and food insecurity across the region (Penssan, 2022; FAO et al., 2025).

Brazil and the MST offer a valuable lens for examining these dynamics. While Brazil is a leading global exporter of agribusiness commodities (Barros, 2024), the MST has embraced agroecology as a counter-narrative to dominant development logics centred on productivity and profit maximisation (Chappell et al., 2013; Altieri, 2000; James et al., 2023; Costa Neto and Canavesi, 2002). The movement, however, has long faced social stigma and widespread criminalisation, with numerous cases documenting the disproportionate violence it has endured (Vieira, 2006; Fernandes et al., 2020). One emblematic case was the murder of 19 peasants by military police during protests in 1996¹ (Carter, 2010; Stédile and Fernandes, 2012). More recently, the 2020 police invasion and subsequent demolition of an agroecological community school (Meek et al., 2024) underscores the persistence of such violence. The MST’s efforts to distribute healthy agroecological food produced on agrarian reform settlements are often obscured by the fact that landless workers are frequently portrayed as invaders or criminals, and in recent years, far-right politicians and agribusiness leaders have increasingly branded them as terrorists (CNN Brasil, 2024).

These political tensions directly shape MST strategies in relation to FMs. A paradigmatic example occurred in 2019, when the National Agrarian Reform Fair – an event that in previous editions attracted over 250,000 participants – was prohibited by local authorities, illustrating

¹ The International Day of Peasant Struggles, held annually on 17 April, was established by *Via Campesina* in remembrance of the *Massacre of Eldorado do Carajás*.

how unsympathetic governments can obstruct grassroots initiatives. This episode challenges the assumption, discussed by scholars such as Oths and Groves (2012), that policymakers and governments view new markets as a “boon” to reputation and revenue. Instead, it supports Thomson (2019) argument that authoritarian regimes often implement urban-biased policies which diminish support for small-scale farmers.

The MST experience thus invites a critical rethinking of the FMs concept, not as neutral economic spaces, but as arenas of political struggle where battles over autonomy, justice, and systemic transformation are actively waged.

3. Methods

3.1. Case study

This study adopts a case study approach, a well-established strategy for investigating phenomena beyond the researcher’s control (Yin, 2009). As Snow (2022) highlights, case studies are especially appropriate when the object illustrates a significant theoretical concept or process, and is conditioned by specific temporal and spatial conditions. While results may be context-specific, they nonetheless offer valuable insights for broader theoretical understanding and support analytical generalisations that extend past the immediate setting (Giménez, 2012; Snow, 2022).

The case study focuses on the *Armazém do Campo* network, a set of urban FMs organised by the MST. *Armazém do Campo*, meaning “countryside warehouse”, was selected for several interrelated reasons.

First, the MST is Brazil’s most prominent agrarian social movement and a key pillar of *Via Campesina* in Latin America, a major transnational peasant alliance. According to the movement’s estimations, since its foundation in 1984, it has mobilised approximately half a million families, including both those settled through agrarian reform and those still engaged in land occupations.

Second, the *Armazém do Campo* network illustrates the MST’s deliberate strategy to pursue, what Altieri and Nicholls (2008) define as, efforts to “scale up” agroecological production and advance food sovereignty. As of May 2025, the network comprised 27 brick-and-mortar units² across 12 of Brazil’s 26 states, in addition to the Federal District (Table 1). Taken together, the cities where these units are located represent a combined population of approximately 38.4 million people, roughly 19 % of Brazil’s total population (203,080,756 inhabitants).

Third, and most critically, *Armazém do Campo* provides unique insights into the heterogeneity of FMs worldwide, showcasing a Global South case. Unlike many Northern FMs that rely heavily on state support or institutional legitimacy (Renting et al., 2003; Brown, 2002; Drágoi and Grubor, 2021; Monticone and Samoggia, 2025), it is a valuable case to explore how alternative food initiatives operate in politically polarised contexts where democracy and agroecological transitions are at stake, and where social movements face criminalisation (Niederle et al., 2023; Vieira, 2006; Fernandes et al., 2020; Grisa et al., 2022).

3.2. Data collection, methods and analysis

This study draws on document analysis and thematic coding of public interviews with key leaders, landless rural workers, consumers, and other figures connected to the *Armazém do Campo* network since its founding in July 2016.

The interviews, sourced from the MST’s official website – a repository of news and archival materials – enable a transversal analysis of the network’s values, goals, and evolution. In the digital era, official communication platforms such as the MST website increasingly serve as

² For this study, only the brick-and-mortar units were considered. Other initiatives of the *Armazém do Campo* network, such as periodic food baskets groups, were not part of our analysis.

Table 1

Distribution of *Armazém do Campo* outlets by year of opening, city (state) and its inhabitants, Brazil (2016–2025).

Year	City (State)	Capital’s state	City’s population
2016	São Paulo (SP)	x	11,451,999
2017	Belo Horizonte (MG)	x	2,315,560
2018	Rio de Janeiro (RJ)	x	6,211,223
2019	Recife (PE)	x	1,488,920
2019	São Luís (MA)	x	1,037,775
2020	Cascavel (PR)		348,051
2021	Campo Grande (MS)	x	898,100
2021	Porto Alegre (RS)	x	1,332,845
2021	Londrina (PR)		555,965
2021	Montes Claros (MG)		414,240
2021	Ortigueira (PR)		24,192
2021	Teófilo Otoni (MG)		137,418
2021	Uberlândia (MG)		713,224
2022	Brasília (DF)	x	2,817,381
2022	Salvador (BA)	x	2,417,678
2022	Bauru (SP)		379,146
2022	Campinas (SP)		1,139,047
2022	Juiz de Fora (MG)		540,756
2022	Porto Seguro (BA)		168,326
2023	Almenara (MG)		40,364
2023	Nova Santa Rita (RS)		29,024
2023	Pelotas (RS)		325,685
2023	São Caetano do Sul (SP)		165,655
2023	São José dos Campos (SP)		697,054
2024	Aracaju (SE)	x	602,757
2024	Belém (PA)	x	1,303,403
2024	João Pessoa (PB)	x	833,932

Source: authors’ elaboration (Data: MST and *Armazém do Campo* official websites; IBGE, 2022).

primary data sources (Carvalho et al., 2022; Mazza, 2024). These materials convey the collective voice of the movement and its chosen public narrative, offering a distinctive perspective on market visions emerging from a Latin American rural movement.

The sample included all interviews and information published on MST’s official website from July 2016 to May 2025 (date of data retrieval) that contained the keyword “*Armazém do Campo*” in the news page’s headline.

Texts categorised as news available at <https://mst.org.br/noticias/> were extracted in two phases. Phase 1 involved an automated extraction using a script written in the NodeJS programming language to retrieve all headlines, links, and publication dates for the selected period (2016–2025). The identification phase yielded 8122 news pages. Phase 2 consisted of a systematic manual search for screening, application of eligibility and exclusion criteria, and removal of duplicates using Google Spreadsheets. Predefined eligibility and exclusion criteria were applied: news pages were considered eligible if the headline included the keyword “*Armazém do Campo*”. News pages that lacked this keyword in the headline were excluded. Only one duplicate page (Portuguese/English versions) was identified. The final sample included 99 news pages for qualitative analysis (Fig. 1).

All 99 news pages were thoroughly read and analysed, with direct interview quotations identified and classified by year and by the social groups of the interviewee. A total of 144 interviews were recorded in the 99 news pages, with an average of 1.5 quotations per page analysed. Most of the news pages were published after 2021 (n = 73; 74 %), coinciding with the post-COVID-19 expansion of the network (until 2020, the network comprised five outlets; see Table 1). The majority of quotations came from MST leaders (n = 72; 50 %). Other groups represented were landless rural workers (n = 17; 12 %), urban consumers (n = 13; 9 %), politicians (n = 13; 9 %), artists (n = 6; 4 %), academics (n = 5; 4 %), and others (n = 18; 12 %). This latter category included leaders from allied organisations, event organisers, and guest speakers. All interviews cited here were translated from Portuguese to English by the first author.

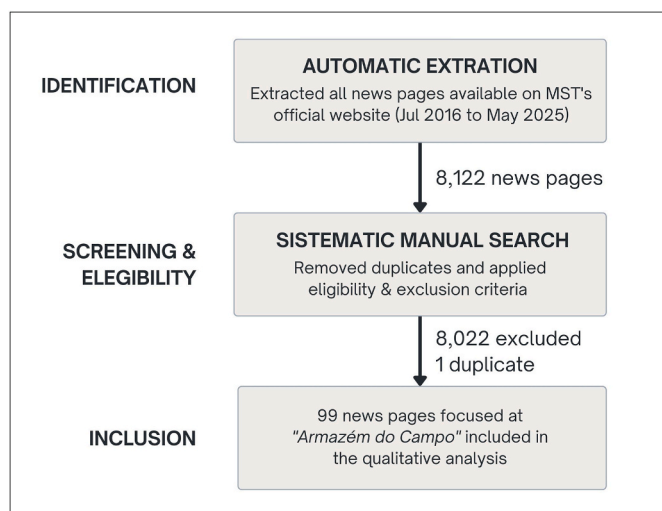


Fig. 1. Data extraction, screening and eligibility process for qualitative analysis.

Source: authors.

Additionally, the official *Armazém do Campo* website (<https://armazemdocampo.com.br/>) was consulted to verify the addresses (city and state) of venues. Population estimates for each city hosting an outlet were obtained from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2022).

4. Findings

The findings highlight three major themes, organised as follows: i) the ideological foundation and operation of *Armazém do Campo*; ii) how the MST uses food to politicise these markets; and iii) the innovative vision of MST in scaling up agroecological and social justice values.

4.1. More than farmers' markets

From sporadic food sales in agrarian reform settlements since the mid-1980s to the establishment of a national retail network in the 21st century, the MST has substantially expanded its presence in urban food markets. A pivotal moment occurred in 2016, marked by the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff and a subsequent political shift toward the far-right, which increasingly criminalised social movements. Amid this turbulent scenario, the opening of a “countryside warehouse” by Brazil’s principal agrarian movement in the biggest metropolis of South America emerged as a symbolic act.

As the framework of repeasantisation suggests (van der Ploeg, 2008, 2018), establishing *Armazém do Campo* in urban centres allowed the MST to reorganise food chains and economic infrastructures around principles of grassroots autonomy. As one settler explained, these venues are especially significant as a means of bypassing mainstream retail systems and resisting market exclusion of smallholder farmers:

“Most of the time, we produce a lot, but the products end up in wholesale markets and big cities without their identity. People buy them thinking they are from agribusiness. What is not conveyed to the public is the reality – that they are the result of struggle and history. So, it is very important for us to bring our products to large urban centres and offer them to people, letting them know these come from agrarian reform settlements and family farming” (Settler Rural Worker, 28 May 2019).

A combination of factors motivated the creation of the network, including commitment to social action, sustainable food systems, and public awareness. A key catalyst was rising consumer demand for agroecological products, observed especially after the first National

Agrarian Reform Fair in 2015, which drew over 150,000 attendees and sold 200 tonnes of food. As the network coordinator recalled:

“As the fair was a success, with products from all over the country, many comrades here in the city who wanted access to the agrarian reform products asked: ‘Well, you’re leaving, and how are we going to buy this later?’” (Armazém do Campo’s National Coordinator, 10 August 2021).

Compared with most FMs described in the literature (Figueroa-Rodríguez et al., 2019), *Armazém do Campo* presents a distinctive retail model. Unlike weekly Saturday early-morning FMs, outlets operate daily during standard working hours, with a schedule that aligns more closely with urban consumer routines. Operating within enclosed, privately managed spaces, they also differ from open-air markets usually held in public locations and reliant on municipal support. Most are located in major cities (see Table 1), where citizens are more likely to visit FMs than those living in towns (Török et al., 2025). At first glance, outlets may resemble organic-food shops, as indoor infrastructure facilitates compliance with hygiene regulations, protects against weather-related disruptions, and eases storage – challenges commonly faced by conventional FMs (Fig. 2).

However, a closer examination reveals key differences from supermarkets, health-food stores, or other FMs in terms of belonging, ownership, and control. Due to the network’s structure, consumers do not interact directly with all producers. The MST acts as a collective intermediary representing landless workers³, reconfiguring the role of midstream agents in FMs (Ruben, 2024). This approach still fosters reciprocity relations – particularly through outlet staffing and product traceability – while allowing farmers to participate in SFSCs with fewer off-farm commitments than typical FMs (Mount, 2012). Interviews indicate that landless workers still experience a strong sense of inclusion, empowerment, and agency: *“It is a great satisfaction and honour to carry out this marketing process through an instrument that is also ours, like Armazém do Campo” (Settler Rural Worker, 18 August 2017).* Table 2 summarises the main characteristics, based on data collected from the news pages consulted on MST’s official website.

Distinguished above all by its political significance, these outlets are repeatedly describe as more than just a “shop” or “store”. As several leaders have expressed, *Armazém do Campo*:

“brings agrarian reform closer to the public, as a regional hub. It is more than just a store for organic, agroecological, and family farmed goods, it is a space for interaction between rural and urban realities, which are different, but not dichotomous, they complement each other” (MST’s leader from Production Sector, 8 December 2022).

“is not just a retail space – it is also meant to be a space for dialogue. When one purchases agribusiness products, one is supporting agribusiness. When one purchases from family farming, one is supporting family farming. Armazém embodies a political vision, extending far beyond a commercial one” (Coordinator of Recife’s Armazém do Campo, 28 May 2019).

MST leaders use specific terms to convey the initiative’s broader political purpose, describing it as the “MST’s culture embassy in the cities” and a “refuge for the left”:

“It is the MST’s cultural embassy in the big city. It is a space where it is possible to discuss politics, being a woman, Black, LGBT, without fear. We are creating a space for debate, made for being occupied by those who still

³ For MST, the term “*Sem Terra*” denotes a collective political identity embraced by all members, uniting settled and landless families in encampments awaiting agrarian reform. Rather than a transitional condition, this identity embodies a broader political struggle, demanding land redistribution and the conditions to live and work with dignity as rural workers (See more at Carter, 2010).



Fig. 2. Armazém do Campo, São Paulo city, Brazil, 2025.
 Note: Faces in the image have been blurred to protect consumers' privacy.
 Source: authors

Table 2
 Main characteristics of Armazém do Campo, MST, Brazil. Source: authors.

	General information	Description and examples
Network composition	A total of 27 outlets distributed across all five Brazilian regions	Expansion timeline: 2016 – Launch of the network with the first outlet in São Paulo
Location	Mainly in the centres of large cities, with some positioned in symbolic sites Indoor spaces, privately managed	2021 - Within five years more than 10 outlets had been established in four out five Brazilian regions (in order of opening: Southeast, Northeast, South, and Midwest) 2024 - Nationwide expansion with the opening of the Belém outlet in the North region Most outlets are located in state capitals, with one-third situated in cities with over 1 million inhabitants. Porto Alegre outlet is based at the Bank Workers' Union, while the Salvador outlet operates in a historical house in the <i>Pelourinho</i> area, a site symbolic of Black resistance.
Hours of operation	Open daily during working hours	São Paulo outlet: Monday–Friday, 9am–8pm; Saturday, 9am–7pm São Luís outlet: Monday–Friday, 8am–6pm; Saturday, 8am–2pm
Products available	Up to 500 items in some outlets, including both food and non-food products	Fruits, vegetables, rice, beans, pasta, bread, coffee, sugar, flours, eggs, milk, jams, beverages, and so on. Other non-food items such as MST-branded apparel, books of political literature, hygiene products, and artisanal crafts.
Staffing	Primarily composed of landless workers, with priority given to women, young people, and LGBT ^a groups	In 2022, staffing consisted of 60 % women, 90 % young people, and 75 % identifying as part of the LGBT community.
Key features	Collective agency and autonomous governance Coordinated network with shared logistics and staffing training Multifunctional urban hubs	The outlets are managed by MST and operate independently of public policy support. MST operates logistics centres that assist both the network and other food procurement initiatives. Courses are organised to train staff using shared manuals. Activities include communal meals, agroecological veg box schemes, bookshops, political education events, solidarity campaigns, and cultural performances.

^a LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, encompassing a range of sexual orientations and gender identities. Here, this terminology is used in accordance with the name of the MST working group “LGBT Sem Terra”.

believe in transforming society” (MST leader from Culture Sector, 30 July 2019).

“It is a refuge for the progressive left to celebrate, reflect, and prepare for future battles” (MST’s National Coordinator, 14 September 2019).

Despite being hosted in private buildings, leaders insist that *“the Armazéns do Campo serve as public spaces for the MST in the cities to hold debates with the urban working class” (Armazém do Campo’s Coordinator, 20 October 2022)*. Furthermore, as noted elsewhere (Tanaka and Portilho, 2019), rural movements in Brazil are increasingly investing in the multifunctionality of market spaces (Table 2), fostering opportunities for socialisation and less hierarchical, more participatory forms of activism.

4.2. Eating is political: winning stomachs, hearts and minds

At Armazém do Campo *“eating is a political act”*, as one of the network’s national coordinators explained (5 September 2019). Rather than reproducing neutral or “flagless” marketplaces, he stresses that for the network: *“it is important for people who buy MST products to understand this dimension” (Armazém do Campo’s National Coordinator, 5 September 2019)*, explaining that the initiative is structured according to the following pillars:

- i) *promoting Popular Agrarian Reform;*

- ii) strengthening the commercialisation of products from peasant, Indigenous, quilombola,⁴ and riverside communities;
- iii) providing healthy, organic food to urban populations; and
- iv) showcasing the cultural practices embedded in struggles for land.

Through these pillars, MST members attribute multiple layers of meaning to food, seeking to de-commodify it, in terms such as described by Appadurai (1986). For them, food is both sustenance (stomachs) and symbol (hearts and minds). It is a material platform through which a range of agendas – spanning health, gender, race, and culture – can be interconnected. In this sense, *Armazém do Campo* should also be understood in relation to the MST's broader values and political practices. In their own words, the *Armazém do Campo* was conceived:

“to bring the issue of Agrarian Reform into the city, to win hearts and minds around the struggle for land, through healthy food free of agrochemicals and poison, and also to express our struggle through art and culture” (MST's leader, 14 May 2024).

“for you to find healthy food, without pesticides, without toxic relationships, without violence against women, child exploitation, or practices analogous to slavery. One can find products from landless and peasants families, who, since the 1980s, have carried the landless identity, overall, due to the responsibility of bringing justice through the land” (Coordinator of Salvador's Armazém do Campo, 15 July 2022).

Some outlets stock up to 500 carefully selected items. As one leader exemplifies: *“in our warehouses, one will not find genetically modified food, nor the conventional brands that dominate the market” (28 July 2022)*. The focus is on healthy staple ingredients of the Brazilian diet (Table 2), with organic rice produced by MST being one of the most emblematic products sold at *Armazém do Campo*. In the opinion of one of the network coordinators, it represents the movement's “flagship product” (20 October 2022). In a country with the highest total pesticide use worldwide (Bombardi, 2023), MST agrarian reform settlements host Latin America's largest organic rice production. Rice and beans constitute an iconic combination of Brazilian cuisine, although it is also true that their consumption has declined with the growing prevalence of ultra-processed foods (IBGE, 2020). According to the MST, in 2023 its cooperatives harvested over 16,000 tonnes of organic rice from 3200 hectares, involving 352 families organised into seven cooperatives across 22 settlements in southern Brazil.

Beyond rural alliances with Indigenous, *quilombola*, riverside, and other agrarian movements, *Armazém do Campo* network strengthens cooperation with urban organisations. The Porto Alegre outlet, hosted in the Bank Workers' Union headquarters, illustrates this dynamic:

“For some time, we had been discussing how to put together – at the same building of the Bank Workers' Union – the transformation and solidarity symbolised by Armazém do Campo and the MST for rural workers with the unity and resistance represented by the union for urban workers. Uniting these two beautiful and complementary struggles in the same space is for us, besides an achievement, a gesture of hope” (President of Bank Workers' Union, 28 May 2025).

Food thus builds solidarity among social movements, rural and urban workers, and consumers. Interviews with consumers indicate that social ties mediated by food reinforce reciprocity. One shopper remarked: *“besides buying the product, one also supports a cause” (Urban consumer, 1 August 2016)*. Others stressed the idea that MST proposes more than FMs:

“Unlike other markets, here you find a wide variety of products free from poison – agroecological and organic – originating from agrarian reform. This supports the work of agrarian reform, small farmers, and family agriculture” (Urban consumer, 10 August 2021).

“It is more than a market that sells ideology; it sells health for a good cause” (Urban consumer, 1 August 2018).

Ultimately, by making its food production accessible in the cities, the MST works to legitimise its political agenda for agrarian reform among public opinion. As one consumer noted: *“There is a very distorted view of what the MST is and what it does. And I think the MST's presence in public spaces also helps to break this taboo that has been created” (20 October 2022)*. While stigma surrounding land occupations persists, the robustness and the communication of the *Armazém do Campo* network demonstrate the potential of agrarian reform settlements to produce both healthy food and new political imaginaries.

4.3. Scaling up of agroecological and social values

Together, the *Armazém do Campo* venues are referred to as *“the largest network of Popular Agrarian Reform products in Brazil” (MST official website, 2021)*, consolidating their role as a significant national retail operation. The long-term expansion plans for this network are ambitious. In an interview in 2021, its Coordinator stated: *“it is possible to open 1,000 shops in the country within 15 to 20 years”*, emphasising that *“since the MST is a mass movement, all our activities must also be mass-oriented, including the outlets” (10 August 2021)*.

This rhetoric aligns with the MST's self-definition as a “mass social movement”, as stated on its website, and is evidenced by a well-documented strategy of massification, present in its encampments, occupations, public marches, and events⁵ (Carter, 2010; Stédile and Fernandes, 2012; Caldart, 2000). Data published by MST further illustrate the network's growing capacity to sustain a broad and stable market for agrarian reform families. According to MST's official website in 2023, the units nationwide connect 1,000 organisations, associations and co-operatives supplying a variety of items. The oldest and most commercially active outlet, located in the city of São Paulo, sold 4.5 million items from all five Brazilian regions across 200,000 transactions between 2016 and 2019. Official financial data are not publicly available, but one news page reported that sales at the São Paulo outlet exceeded 1.8 million Brazilian reais (equivalent to approximately half a million US dollars at the time) between 2016 and 2018, providing an indicative measure of its financial turnover.

During special events, it is evident that both MST and *Armazém do Campo* are capable of managing large-scale operations. For instance, while hundreds of consumers attended the opening of the third outlet in Rio de Janeiro in 2018, the inauguration of the João Pessoa unit in 2024 attracted more than 5,000 participants, underscoring the growing visibility and resonance of MST's markets among urban consumers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the network also organised extensive solidarity campaigns. According to its estimates, the Recife outlet distributed around 1 million meals. In São Paulo city, using the movement's warehouse infrastructure, more than 20,000 food parcels were prepared and donated, amounting to approximately 300,000 tonnes of food.

This scale is thus incidental, but strategic. For instance, it is considered essential for ensuring the viability of agrarian reform production in the settlements. As one landless rural worker expressed:

⁵ According to MST's official website, over its 40-year history land occupations have secured around 7.5 million hectares, with some of the largest camps involving 2500 families and 3400 hectares. Beyond the *Armazém do Campo* network, the movement organised periodic National Agrarian Reform Fairs. The 2025 edition gathered over 300,000 attendees and sold more than 500 tonnes of agroecological food. Further information is available at: www.mst.org.br.

⁴ *Quilombola* communities are ethnic groups, predominantly composed of Black populations, that identify themselves based on specific relationships with land, kinship, territory, ancestry, traditions and their own cultural practices (See more at Brasil, 2025).

"For us, the settled and the landless families living in encampments of agrarian reform, this place will be very important. We, the farmers who live off what we produce on our farms, knowing that we will be able to sell our products weekly, it is really great. A big achievement for the MST" (Settler Rural Worker, 25 June 2024).

Without evading the economic or commercial dimension, the network stresses reciprocity and solidarity values. What is particularly innovative about the MST's approach to market is that it differs from the more well-known face-to-face, small-scale, local, and niche initiatives. Drawing on grassroots Latin America experiences, it offers a retail model that "scales up" alternative food systems (Altieri and Nicholls, 2008), challenging assumptions about what FMs should be and how they should operate.

5. Discussion

In Latin America, markets are typically not conceived as autonomous political arenas for driving social change but rather mobilised as complementary instruments to influence state politics, given that institutional arenas have historically remained the primary battleground for citizens and social movements (Portilho and Micheletti, 2019). However, evidence from 144 interview excerpts published between 2016 and 2025 in the case of *Armazém do Campo* demonstrates how the MST has redefined its relationship with markets.

Moving beyond earlier "anti-market" discourses, which equated the market with an exclusive domain of neoliberal exploitation, the movement now incorporates it into its agenda for agrarian reform, agroecology and food sovereignty. Variations in the action repertoires of social movements can be linked to shifts in political regimes. The hostile political environment, characterised by the dismantling of public policies supporting agroecological transition and the criminalisation of social movements, has rendered market initiatives a viable alternative for sustaining grassroots practices (Muñoz et al. 2021, 2024; Lerrer and Medeiros, 2014; Fernandes, 2022; Flynn, 2024).

Nevertheless, the MST designed *Armazém do Campo* not as conventional retail stores but as political spaces, embedding principles of collective struggle, autonomous governance, and process of scaling up. As outlined in previous sections, a core objective of MST's retail model is massification. Mass often implies capitalist logics, as seen in agribusiness (Pompeia, 2020), wholesale supermarkets (Reardon et al., 2003) and fast-food chains (Ritzer, 2019). In contrast, the MST frames mass food production and distribution as key elements of a counter-hegemonic project it terms "popular agrarian reform". Agrarian reform is framed not as a demand limited to the landless workers, but as part of a wider struggle for healthy food and social justice, rooted in the interdependence of rural and urban life. Within this popular project, consumers actively share responsibility for driving social change by participating in boycotts of *Armazém do Campo*'s products.

Bringing together insights from scholarship on alternative food networks and political consumerism (Boström et al., 2019b; Goodman et al., 2012; Renting et al., 2003), as well as from Latin American rural studies (Altieri and Toledo, 2011; Fernandes, 2022; Lerrer and Medeiros, 2014), we propose to conceptualise these processes as mass food political consumerism: a form of political consumerism that democratises access by reclaiming scale-up as a mechanism against exclusionary dynamics.

The case demonstrates an explicit subversion of the assumption that SFSCs must remain small and localised, or inevitably become depoliticised if expanded, due to the risk of homogenised food systems and the dilution of their ideological content. Unlike many Global Northern alternative food movements, often criticised as niche, urban, white, and middle-class oriented (Guthman, 2008; Alkon, 2012; Figueroa-Rodríguez et al., 2019), the MST's FMs network, embedded in the Latin American context, treats massification as both strategic and political. First, it is strategic in facilitating logistics, lowering operational costs

and widening reach. Secondly, it is political in raising awareness and ensuring agroecological healthy food is accessible to broader and more diverse publics.

As the data indicate, the MST also uses markets to advance intersectional alliances by intentionally creating inclusive spaces. Outlets foreground constituencies often marginalised in formal politics, including women, Black, and LGBT groups, and converge with indigenous, *quilombola*, and working-class urban movements. Such alliances are reflected in site selection, staffing, thematic events and product offerings directly linked to these groups. *Armazém do Campo* thus connects FMs to wider struggles against colonialism, patriarchy, and racism (Pahk, 2022).

Political consumerism is therefore not confined to localised, niche, individualised, or face-to-face forms. The notion of "mass", largely mobilised by MST, is applied here to highlight the building of a collective identity that engages social movements, producers and consumers in scaling up networks. This mass character extends to the products themselves. The emphasis is not on exclusive, luxurious, or rare goods produced in limited quantities for a very restricted group of consumers with greater purchasing power located near organic-food stores (generally, in middle-class and wealthy neighbourhoods). Instead, the focus is on everyday food items produced in cooperative settings and distributed nationally across multiple outlets. In this sense, it converges with scholarship describing political consumerism, whether small- or large-scale, as embedded in mundane human practices (Boström et al., 2019a). As a grassroots initiative of resistance, innovation, and solidarity, *Armazém do Campo* adds value to food by infusing FMs with the agendas of Global South movements.

Nonetheless, the redefinition of FMs as politically driven spaces also generates tensions. While the majority of insights derive from MST leaders and rural workers (n = 89; 62 %), and thus reflect perspectives from within the movement, the evidence should not be read as a homogeneous *Sem Terra* voice. Indeed, testimonies consistently describe *Armazém do Campo* as a "reference" for healthy and agroecological food in Brazil. However, it is also known that some leaders continue to express scepticism about the transformative potential of markets, favouring institutional initiatives instead. Some contended, for instance, that the main political role of social movements such as the MST is to put pressure on the state; therefore, in order to make healthy food more accessible and capable of reaching a broader audience, efforts should focus on distributing food through institutional procurement programmes for schools, hospitals, and other community facilities (Moraes and Ferreira, 2023). In Brazil, as in other parts of the Global South, socioeconomic disparities mean that hunger, food insecurity and limited buying power persist as major challenges, making ambivalence toward market capacities for problem-solving understandable.

Growth has also been uneven, underscoring how scaling up FMs can both resolve and create challenges. Although not explicitly emphasised in the interviews, some outlets have closed⁶, and the majority are concentrated in Brazil's wealthiest region. One-third of units are located in the Southeast (n = 12; 44 %), with only one located in the North, opened in 2024. As we see, the expansion to other cities and neighbourhoods is already among the network's future goals. In addition, its coordinator mentioned that "our challenge is to go to the periphery of the cities and create the *Armazém* in the favelas. It is a challenge, but we are working on it" (*Armazém do Campo's National Coordinator*, 5 August 2021).

As expected, *Armazém do Campo* is part of a constellation of MST

⁶ Comparison between reports on unit openings and network data shows that some outlets ceased operations during the period studied. Examples include the venues located in the municipalities of São Gabriel (originally opened in 2017) and Caruaru (opened in 2019). Others were temporarily closed and later reopened at new addresses, such as the Porto Alegre unit (opened in 2021 and reopened in 2024).

activities. Another response to the rise of the far-right in Brazil has been the movement's insertion into formal politics, with several leaders elected to parliament, especially after the 2022 elections – an outcome that poses its own new challenges. Although autonomy over public governance is a priority in order to keep the network relatively insulated from the volatility of state or corporate patronage, the MST leverages the influence of elected landless to build support for FM initiatives and mitigate constraints imposed by conservative governments within this polarised political context. For instance, following a legislative proposal introduced by a locally elected settler, Rio de Janeiro's outlet was declared intangible cultural heritage in 2024.

6. Conclusion

The *Armazém do Campo* network suggests that distinct Latin American forms of FMs and food political consumerism are on the rise, stading out in particular for challenging assumptions that FMs are niche-oriented and dependent on public support. It is not the intention of this study to point out which model is best. Instead, the research underscores the need to critically reflect on the category itself. In doing so, our data and analysis demonstrate that FMs are not static or uniformly, but adaptive arenas of negotiation where food landscapes and notions of sustainability and social justice are continuously redefined. The MST's case offers a clear counterpoint to critiques of mass food production and consumption, as it reclaims scale as a political and strategic dimension aimed at democratising food access and evading exclusionary patterns of consumption.

In this study, we have proposed a critical reflection on the concept of FMs, grounded in empirical evidence from the Brazilian context and its specific governance configurations. Further theoretically guided and empirically focused research is needed. For instance, direct interviews, ethnographic and/or quantitative research could be useful to deepen aspects that are still little known. Future research could also explore and compare both Northern and Southern contexts.

To the best of our knowledge, one of the main strengths of this study is that it documents what we consider a significant reconfiguration of the FMs paradigm, arising not under conditions of state support but within politically hostile contexts shaped by conservative administrations, as observed in Brazil and elsewhere. Undoubtedly, favourable policies can enhance the viability of FMs. However, this case study demonstrates the need for the concept of FMs to account for their ability to thrive despite, rather than solely because of, state support.

Our goal was to document and shed light on the diversity of practices involved in organising and operating FMs. By highlighting their heterogeneity and capacity to combine economic functionality with sociocultural and political dimensions, we hope to expand the analytical and strategic toolkit available to scholars, activists, policymakers, and market managers.

The *Armazém do Campo* phenomenon reminds us that FMs, when organised from below, are not limited to goods exchange. They can become spaces of community building, cultural expression, intersectional struggles, and political imagination that prefigure healthy, sustainable, and just food futures. In the case analysed, FMs have been described as a refuge for marginalised groups and an embassy in cities representing the agrarian interests, showing how grassroots groups have been establishing new understandings of the rural. But perhaps most crucially, a critical reflection on the concept of FMs offers an opportunity for those concerned with increasing accessibility to agroecological and socially just food to acknowledge bottom-up initiatives – especially those emerging from once so-called underdeveloped countries, which are also capable of taking the lead in shaping promising new initiatives.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jennifer Tanaka: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation,

Conceptualization. **Alessandro Scuderi:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Donatella Privitera:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

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Declaration of competing interest

Nothing to declare.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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